

A CELEBRATION OF FREEDOM: “FREEDOM IS NEVER FREE”

...For you are a slave to whatever controls you. 2 Peter 2:19

On this annual festival, set aside to celebrate the freedom we enjoy in the God-Blessed land called America, I want to consider with you the fact that “Freedom is Never...Free!” Freedom at whatever level; always comes with some price, and today we’ll consider 4 types of Freedom and their corresponding costs. First though, a story I heard recently.

A prisoner in a maximum security prison in Sydney, Australia tried to escape by climbing underneath the hood of a large truck delivering bread to the penitentiary. Anxious moments passed, the motor started, and he heard the familiar sounds of the prison gates opening and closing. He breathed a sigh of relief and couldn’t wait for the truck to make its next stop, so he could make his escape. It wasn’t long before it did. He waited a few minutes and then began to sneak out from under the hood; hot, dirty, and...a bit distraught as he realized when he hit the ground and looked around...he was in the courtyard of another minimum security prison just 10 miles from the one he’d just broken out of! Like that prisoner our own attempts at lasting freedom often leave us in another prison, sometimes just 10 miles down the road of life.

Often our attempts at freedom from our sins leave us dejected, dirty, and in another prison. This shouldn’t surprise us. We cannot save ourselves. I know it almost sounds anti-American; on this “celebrate America’s birthday”; to not encourage you to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. But when it comes to our relationship with God, salvation and freedom come from what Jesus has done for us, not what we might do for Him. We don’t earn God’s love, we are invited to embrace it, experience it and enjoy it.

Consider this quote from one of our famous former presidents: “It is the duty of nations as well as of men (and women) to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord. We know that by His divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world. May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.” Abraham Lincoln, Oct 1863. In 1863 those words inspired a nation to repentance and humility. Today they would be met with apathetic silence from too many churches, and cries for impeachment or resignation from the secular humanists, were our president to call us to such repentance. There is no greater need, there is no better time. Consider with me these 4 kinds of Freedom:

1. PSEUDO – FREEDOM: WHERE SIN IS THE MASTER

*That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the **freedom** of God.*
Romans 6:12-14

I want to draw on that final statement from Lincoln's address: "Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us." I believe this to be an apt description of the pseudo-freedom that many folks in this country are banking on today! We'll celebrate the greatness of this country; and ignore the One who makes us great. We'll eat, drink and be merry, and neglect to remember the One who provides us with all bounty. We'll gather with family and friends and play nice for at least this one day; while we reject the One who connects all relationships in love. My friends, without Jesus Christ as the master of our lives – sin reigns. Without God as the central focus and undeniable foundation of this country – sin reigns. We can party and rodeo and blow up fireworks tonight, but the reality of our sin will track us down tomorrow. We enjoy only a pseudo-freedom today – where sin is still the master; unless we've yielded our lives and allegiances to Jesus Christ. The second kind of freedom is:

2. PHARISAIC – FREEDOM: WHERE LAW IS THE MASTER

*So, my friends, this is something like what has taken place with you. When Christ died he took that entire rule-dominated way of life down with him and left it in the tomb, leaving you free to "marry" a resurrection life and bear "offspring" of faith for God. For as long as we lived that old way of life, doing whatever we felt we could get away with, sin was calling most of the shots as the old law code hemmed us in. And this made us all the more rebellious. In the end, all we had to show for it was miscarriages and stillbirths. But now that we're no longer shackled to that domineering mate of sin, and out from under all those oppressive regulations and fine print, we're free to live a new life in the **freedom** of God. Romans 7:4-6*

I'm afraid there are many Christian people who have merely exchanged their former sin-master for a new law-master. I had a former college roommate who spent so much time memorizing scripture that he began neglecting Sunday School, then Bible Study, then worship. At that point I reminded him that the disciplines of the Christian life are never intended to become ends in and of themselves; they are merely a means to an end, and according to Richard Foster in Celebration of Discipline: the end of all Christian disciplines is Freedom!

I see some pharisaic freedom in some Christian circles today, where man-made and human invented rules and regulations have taken up residence, even become superior over the law of God. We are to be disciplined, and follow God's law, and be obedient; but we are to do so in the spirit of Jesus, and with a freedom in our heart that is built and based on grace, not judgment, condemnation or fear! I sicken at the suggestion that all Christians are viewed by the world as boring, judgmental, anti-homosexual, and right-wing Republican wacko's! Is that really true? How sad!

We have been set free my friends; let us not yield ourselves to any law but the law of Love; loving God, and loving our neighbors. Freedom # 3:

3. PRODIGAL – FREEDOM: WHERE WE ARE THE MASTER

*I'm using this **freedom** language because it's easy to picture. You can readily recall, can't you, how at one time the more you did just what you felt like doing—not caring about others, not caring about God—the worse your life became and the less **freedom** you had? And how much different is it now as you live in God's **freedom**, your lives healed and expansive in holiness? Romans 6:19-22*

There is no big secret that the famous Prodigal Son thought he was choosing and set off, to embrace his freedom. No longer would he have to be subject to his father's stupid rules. No longer would he have to work so hard for such a simple wage. He was free to come and go, and spend and do as he wished...now that is real freedom – where we are our own master...right?

Do you remember what happened to the prodigal? Famine short-changed his inheritance. His new-found, mooching friends soon abandoned him. He went to work for a pig farmer. And the insult of all insults for any self-respecting Jew – he found himself knee deep in pig poop; while he lusted after the slop he was feeding the pigs. Now that's real freedom isn't it!

No, but it is a marvelous reminder that whenever we set ourselves up as the final authority of our own lives...we'll usually end up eating at some wayward trough. It was not until, that light goes on moment: "When he came to his senses..." did he make a decision to swallow his pride, and return home to a patiently praying and waiting Father.

Have we all here today "come to our senses"? I suspect most of us have. Most of us have been to the trough of trouble that revealed how shallow and worthless is independence, when separated from family, faith and God. Most of us have played the prodigal at some point in our lives. Some of us are so far removed from that light going on moment that we forget how traumatic and difficult it can be for others; while we bask in our blessing and snub those still wallowing. If you find yourself today considering the "freedom" you've chosen to be rather "prodigal" don't discount that God might be speaking to you and leading you at this moment to "come to your senses."

4. PERSONAL – FREEDOM: WHERE JESUS IS THE MASTER

Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did. Romans 6:6-11

And that's real Freedom. John said it best: *If the son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.* Indeed. My friends, I would be remiss to not make this as plain as I can; if you are living independently from God, you are experiencing only a Prodigal Freedom. If you have accepted Jesus Christ, but now have exchanged that relationship for a law-filled, judgmental, critical, life; then you are living a Pharisaic life. And if you have never come to your senses and invited Jesus to be the Lord of your life, then sin is still your master, and you are in the midst of a pseudo-freedom, that will blowup at some point just like the fireworks later this evening.

God loves us, and Jesus wants all of us to live...free...really free. I heard that understanding this freedom is a bit like flying a kite. If the wind is strong the kite goes higher and higher, and the kite grows smaller as it tugs against the string. The harder the wind blows, the higher the kite rises. Then let's say the string breaks! The kite is free, but what happens? It no longer soars higher. It starts tumbling, and free-falling, and soon crashes to the ground or becomes tangled in the trees. What kept the kite airborne was the restraint of the string. When that was lost, the kite was unable to fly.

We are never truly freed until we are restrained by something that pulls us higher and higher, and makes us smaller and smaller. It is not the absence of restraints that makes us free. It is not the allure of independence that sets us free. It is not law-keeping that keeps us free. There is no freedom in life until we belong to God. Every other form of it is an illusion. We are free because God wants us to be free. And we can be free today. Let us pray.

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